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ABSTRACT

This paper, the second in a series of five on the current state of citizen education, focuses on mass communication. The following topics are discussed: communications today; the system of freedom of expression; social science research on the media (includes the audience and public information); minorities and the media; public broadcasting; television: violence and children's programming; public service advertising (includes advocacy advertising and free speech messages); the Communications Act of 1978; communication technologies; and the communication system and the future. (EM)

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NEW DIRECTIONS IN MASS COMMUNICATIONS POLICY: IMPLICATIONS FOR CITIZEN EDUCATION AND PARTICIPATION

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FOREWORD

Mass communications play a crucial role in the development of civic competence. Young people and adults derive information about public affairs from television, newspapers, radio, and magazines. The media act as intermediaries between the public and their officials and between various groups that compose local communities. And the choices the media must make — what stories to cover and how to cover them — influence citizens' priorities, determining the issues about which they are concerned.

In the fall of 1977, the USOE Citizen Education Staff sponsored a workshop on the role of the media in citizen education. It was conducted by the University of Michigan and attended by scholars as well as practitioners from commercial and public television, newspapers, and magazines. While stressing the importance of free speech and a free press, the conferees recommended: (1) Efforts to provide access to the various channels of the mass media for all sectors of society; (2) support for developing professional production capacities for those seeking access; and (3) expansion of the number of outlets in order to present more diversified views of what makes a better society.

These recommendations reflect a number of recent developments in communications and policy concerning this field. In the past few years, there has been growing public interest in increasing access to media, broadening the diversity of media content, and encouraging responsiveness to public needs. A variety of citizen groups has been increasingly active in seeking these goals, in order to assure a more effective system of freedom of expression.

Appreciation is due to Larry Rothstein for an outstanding summary of the information provided by a variety of communications specialists who took time to contribute to his research. We are also grateful to the participants in the University of Michigan workshop which first examined connections between citizen education and the media.

This study is one in a series designed to help raise issues and provide information about the current state of citizen education. Others in the series include:

Key Concepts of Citizenship: Perspectives and Dilemmas

Citizen Education Today: Developing Civic Competencies

Citizen Participation: Building a Constituency for Public Policy

Citizen Education and the Future

Citizen Education in the Workplace

An Analysis of the Role of the U.S. Office of Education and Other Selected Federal Agencies in Citizen Education

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COMMUNICATIONS TODAY

This is one of the most portentous moments in the development of America's system of free expression. A new communications environment is rapidly being created by major technological innovations; two-way, interactive cable television, videodisks, videocassettes, communication satellites, and optical fibers are stimulating a rethinking of mass communication policy.

Currently, Congress has before it bills that deal with almost every aspect of communications. The most sweeping is legislation introduced by Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Calif.). chairman of the House Subcommittee on Communications. His proposal would drastically alter the entire telecommunication system, moving from a governmental policy of regulation to a system responsive to market demands.1/

President Carter has also submitted major legislation. His bill is designed to strengthen the public broadcasting system by promoting better insulation from inappropriate political influence, by providing for greater accountability to the public, and by stimulating participation on the part of minorities and women.2/ In addition, the House Subcommittee on Communications has submitted a bill that calls for similar changes in public broadcasting.3/ (The Carnegie Commission of Public Broadcasting will be issuing a major policy report by the beginning of 1979 on the future of public television and radio.)

Each bill is controversial, with concern centering around the proper role of Government in the development of a system of free expression and the possibility of designing a system that will serve not only the interests of business and advertising but also the needs of the public. These bills imply, however, that there is growing dissatisfaction with the current system; all sponsors are intent on creating more diversity, access, and participation.

For the past decade, these goals have headed the agenda of citizens interested in reforming the media. Since 1966, when a landmark decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia held that public groups were "parties in interest" in Federal Communication Commission license renewal proceedings, coalitions of community organizations, public interest and social service groups, and national media reform organizations have achieved significant changes in local and national television and radio.4/ They have successfully fought against racial stereotyping on programs, against barriers to equal employment opportunities, and against excessive violence and commercialism in television programs for children. They have also helped promote access and greater diversity of programs and opinions.

Concern about the media and their power to influence events and control information has also come from other sectors. Social scientists have produced evidence on the harmful effects of television on children; they have investigated the growing influence of the media on our political process and its power to shape public opinion; and they have examined the underlying causes of media behavior.5/

Public officials, most notably former Vice-President Spiro Agnew, have accused the media of bias in their news coverage, making it impossible for citizens to accurately understand the events of the day. And the business community, particularly Mobil Oil Co., has argued that because of technological and professional limitations, the media have distorted information about the energy crisis and confused the public about the proper course for public policy.6/

It is important to sort out these charges, as well as look at where our system of expression has been and where it could be heading. Only after such an examination will the implications of this moment for citizen education be clear. The purpose of this essay is fivefold:

1. To explore the rationale that underlies our system of freedom of expression so as to clarify the need for diversity, access, and participation in mass communication;

2. To examine the social science research that has developed on the media;

3. To look at citizen activity in this area;

4. To review current legislative proposals; and

5. To explore the new technological innovations becoming available.

THE SYSTEM OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

No democracy can function without the right to speak and the right to hear diverse information and ideas. This concept has its roots in the Greek notion of a democratic state: freedom of expression was seen as essential to the attainment of political and moral truth. And it served as the underlying rationale for the First Amendment to our Constitution.

As Professor Thomas Emerson has written, the development of a system of expression was seen by the Founding Fathers as an essential means of assuring individual self-fulfillment, of permitting citizens their right to share in the common decisions that affect them, and of providing a method of maintaining the balance between stability and change in a democratic society.7/

Under the First Amendment, a series of rights has been established to promote a system of expression: the right to form and hold beliefs and opinions, the right to communicate ideas, opinions, and information through any medium; the right to hear the views of others; the right to inquire and have access to information; and the right to assemble to form associations.8/

Throughout most of the history of this country, the prime injunction of the First Amendment has been perceived as the limits it placed on the power of the state to interfere with or abridge free expression.9/ More recently, however, the argument has been made that the Federal Government has an affirmative obligation to ensure that a marketplace of ideas and viewpoints exists.10/

Much recent evidence indicates that the private sector currently fails to reflect the diversity of opinion in society or provide sufficient access for the needs of individuals and groups. Important debate is foreclosed and necessary ideas and information are not exposed. The growth of the public broadcasting system during the past 10 years is one indication of the assumption of a major governmental role in promoting a marketplace of ideas and expression.

Before examining this development and related matters, it is important to look at the research on the media and its audience.

SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ON THE MEDIA*

Most people assume that the media have a tremendous influence on increasing knowledge and awareness of issues, and on changing attitudes, behavior, and values. Research does not bear this out, however. Two statements summarize how the audience reacts to media messages:

1. In the coverage of a topic, the amount and sequence of its presentation, the channels it is carried in, and the time of day it appears will greatly affect whether it will be seen, read, or heard by the audience; and

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*Much of this discussion is based on materials presented at a workshop on the media sponsored by the Citizen Education staff. A summary paper of the workshop was prepared by the Marsh Center for the Study of Journalistic Performance, the Mass Communication Doctoral Program, the Center for Political Studies, and the Center for Research on the Utilization of Scientific Knowledge at the University of Michigan.

2. the structural location of the individual (working, studying, being a homemaker), the interest others around him or her have in it, the amount of previous knowledge, and whether there is a functional outcome of knowing about the topic will account for learning about the topic.11/

These two statements address learning and not attitudes, values, or behaviors. The classic statement in this area is that of Klapper: the media are more likely to reinforce than change attitudes, values, and behaviors.12/

Recent social science work, however, points to a modification of this position. Professor Steven H. Chaffee, writing on political socialization, finds that the mass media — particularly television and newspapers — constitute the principal source of political information for young people, and have considerable impact in determining the general topics people are concerned with. He states that young people attribute to the media considerable influence on their political opinions, in addition to informative power. Chaffee concludes that the news media are not as powerful in stimulating political activity as in cognitive effects.13/

Chaffee's findings are corroborated by the work of McCombs and Shaw, who report that the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but that they are stunningly successful in telling their readers what to think about, i.e., the details of campaigning rather than the issues between candidates. In short, the media have an agenda-setting function.14/ Evidence gathered by George Comstock supports this claim. He found that most people received more information about issues from political campaign commercials than they did from television news coverage.15/

The media have these effects and perform these functions largely because of structural constraints. Traditional research on the mass media has looked at the people involved, their craft orientation, and the products they produce.16/ An increasingly popular approach has been to examine media bureaucracies.17/ Regardless of the approach, it has become obvious that economic conditions largely determine what is produced, how much, at what rate, for what medium, and for what audiences.

Although democratic normative theory attaches primary importance to the discussion of public issues, it is clear that some segments of the media see themselves primarily as entertainers. The economic bases upon which each survives have much to do with whether the particular medium produces "educational," "informative," or "entertaining" content. Television, for example, is an oligopoly and acts in accordance with this model of economic behavior. It has a restricted number of suppliers and distributors, few channels, a focus on a national market, and programs that are based on a small number of familiar formats, genres, and plots. Television, in particular, writes Professor Paul Hirsch:

> ...is less distracted than any other mass media by loyalties to such non-economic goals as editorial policy and standards, generations of family ownership or idiosyncratic decisions based on personal taste.
>
> It is an economic institution, first and foremost, responsive to market forces, and concerned only incidentally with questions about its broader cultural role or possible effects on a Nation of viewers.18/

Newspapers can also be viewed through an economic lens. Many are local monopolies and an increasing number are owned by chains. Craft traditions and occupational norms now must interact with new economic and organizational conditions that may not provide an adequate climate for the broadest and most representative expression of views in a community or an adequate description of public events. For example, circulation expansion may be possible only in affluent suburbs. Urban news must thus be balanced against suburban news not because of "objective" news criteria but because of marketing decisions made at national chain headquarters.19/

Obviously, the political and economic system found in the United States provides a different set of media structures than may be found in other countries. For example, in Canada commercial television co-exists with a government-financed Crown Corp. which has a national mandate to provide information and cultural content bearing on national identity. In Mexico, private activity dominates communication, and the government rarely interferes with the market. In Eastern European countries, the State controls television. Differences can also be found among the magazine, newspaper, radio, and book publishing industries in each of these countries.20/

The point is that there is no way to separate the mass media system from the larger social system.

Clearly, some of the mass media are concerned with providing information about public affairs for an audience specifically interested in this area. The most obvious case is books. Another is magazines. Here publications range from those almost solely concerned with instructing on public issues, such as the New Republic or the National Review, to magazines that focus on news summaries and analysis, such as Time and Newsweek, to magazines that provide incidental political information, such as Ms. or Playboy. Finally, newspapers provide news, news analysis, editorials, columnists, and letters to the editors as well as information on a variety of other areas.

Audience and Public Information

Even if the media were more inclined to present information about public affairs, social science research indicates that such information would be handled in a different manner by different members of the society because of a "knowledge gap."

The "knowledge gap hypothesis," proposed by Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, asserts that "as the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socio-economic status (SES) tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than the lower status segments, so that the gap in information between these segments tends to increase."21/ This hypothesis thus implies that attempts to equalize the distribution of information within a social system through mass media are bound not only to fail, but actually to increase inequality.

Tichenor and his associates list five factors which may account for widening gaps: (1) Differences in communication skills between higher and lower SES persons; (2) differences in existing knowledge from prior exposure; (3) differences in amount of social contact relevant to the topic under study (i.e., public affairs); (4) differences in exposure and retention of information; and (5) the middle-class orientation of the print media which are the primary source of public affairs information.22/ Katzman, who has studied gaps between those with more and less knowledge, offers a list that includes: (1) Differences in communication skills due to differences in education; (2) differences in ability to make use of new information due to differences in the individual's existing knowledge; (3) differences in access to new communications technology due to differences in financial resources; and (4) differences in motivation to use communication resources.23/

So far, mass communication research has focused on two categories of causal factors: audience-related factors such as ability (e.g., communication skills), motivation, and media behavior (e.g., exposure), which are held to be the causes of the widening gaps; and message-related effects, which are held to be the causes of narrowing gaps. The exceptions to this generalization are Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien's argument (1975) that the gaps may be reduced through a motivation to acquire the information, and Katzman's argument that gaps may be widened through unequal access to communication technology.24/

It is important to keep in mind information from such fields as education, developmental psychology, and poverty research. Recent writing in these fields indicates a shift away from interest in characteristics of the individual and toward a study of the factors in the social system which originate and maintain SES-related differentials. The major thrust of this thinking is that persons from different social strata and/or cultures manifest their abilities in different circumstances and, further, that these circumstances are predictable and reasonable given the differences in status and culture. The behavior of the individual is viewed as an understandable, even logical, adaptation to his environment and place in the social system. This is in strong contrast to the deficit interpretation that the individual is deficient in both motivation and ability to deal with the dominant culture.25/

Ettema and Kline have thus reformulated the knowledge gap hypothesis relating to the effects for learning as follows:

> As the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population motivated to acquire that information and/or for which that information is functional tend to acquire the information at a faster rate than those not motivated or for which it is not functional, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease.26/

What are the implications of this research for current proposals to change the media and for citizen groups interested in media reform? First, it would seem to indicate that much more needs to be done before definitive answers will be available on how the media affect political socialization and knowledge about public affairs. Second, the media should not be viewed in such simplistic terms as being motivated by personal biases or liberal ideology; rather their behavior has its roots in organization and economic factors. Change these factors and there will be an alteration in behavior and product. And finally, one of the major goals of citizens groups — an increase of information to all segments of the audience — may require more than just a change in the media. It seems that substantial work needs to be done to alter viewing habits and to increase the skill level of the audience.

With these considerations in mind, it is important now to review some of the areas that have been the focus of reform. These include minority participation, the development of the Public Broadcasting System, the movement to reduce the violence and commercialism directed at children, and the creation of public service advertisements.

MINORITIES AND THE MEDIA

There has been some improvement in the 10 years since the Kerner Commission scored the media for its hiring practices and its portrayal of black conditions.

Television has brought the Nation such distinguished programs about the black experience as "Roots" and the "Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman" as well as developing news broadcasts that have dealt with ghetto life and race relations. Public television has developed minority programs and has made money available to support minority activities and professional training projects; in 1973, for example, it launched the Minority Training Grants Program, a project designed to encourage stations to seek out minority persons for training in management or creative professional areas or to train and upgrade minority persons already employed.27/ Urban newspapers have improved reporting about minorities, increased their sensitivity to minority problems, and developed more supportive editorial policies.28/

At the highest level of authority, however, the picture is dismal. Minorities constitute approximately 20 percent of the population but they control less than 1 percent of the 8,500 commercial radio and television stations currently in operation.29/ Of the 189 chief executive officers in public television stations only five are minority group members. Of the 134 public television executives who have responsibility for designing local program schedules, only two are minority group members. (These two persons have responsibility for the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico Stations.30/ In 1977 over 900 public radio and television stations did not employ one minority person or woman on a full-time basis.

Conditions are no better in the field of journalism. Between 1967-1977, the number of black professionals on daily newspapers went from 25 to about 300, or less than 1 percent of the approximately 40,000 professional print journalists. In 1975, blacks constituted 3 percent of broadcast news professionals. Few blacks are in executive positions. About 100 of the black print journalists work for major newspapers such as the Washington Post (25, or 10 percent of the total) and the New York Times. The remaining 200 are scattered among the other 1,700 newspapers in the country.32/

If minorities are without access to ownership and executive positions, the ability of the media to provide an accurate account of minority life and race relations can be doubted. The U.S. District Court of Appeals, in TV 9, Inc. v. F.C.C., faced the question of the relationship of ownership to content and diversity:

> The fact that other applicants propose to present the view of . . . minority groups in their programing although relevant, does not offset the fact that it is upon ownership that public policy places primary reliance with respect to diversification of content; and that historically it has proven to be significantly influential with respect to editorial comment and the presentation of news.33/

The need for minorities in the newspaper profession is explained by Nancy Hicks of the New York Times:

> The issue is . . . how do you call the story? The issue of quality seems to be rotating around whether or not the person who comes from one background will see the issues and judge what they

are the same way as one from a different background. What we should be doing is increasing the different kinds of people who make those judgments, especially in the afternoon news conferences. You have different people with different perceptions and therein the standard is set, which is not necessarily lower, it is different and probably more representative.34/

PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The recognition of the Government's responsibility to promote a greater diversity of viewpoints can be seen in the development of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. In 1967, the report of the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television demonstrated that noncommercial broadcasting was feeble, inadequately staffed and funded, and barely noticed by the American public.35/

In 1967, there were some 125 educational television stations in the country, reaching slightly more than six million homes each week. Daily audiences usually numbered in the low thousands. Viewership consisted of predominantly higher income and better educated persons. Little in the way of national operations and support activity for educational television and radio existed at that time. Half of the typical station's programs came from one source — National Educational Television. For educational radio, the picture was even bleaker. With few exceptions, most of these radio stations were connected with educational institutions and operated on budgets of less than $25,000 annually.36/

By 1977, public broadcasting had been transformed. The number of Corporation for Public Broadcasting television and radio stations had more then doubled -- 276 for television, 186 for radio. Audiences for both had increased significantly. Sixty percent of all television households turned to public television regularly and public radio's audience had more than doubled to 4.3 million. Increasingly, minorities and families

headed by skilled and unskilled working people were part of the audience. Both the Public Broadcasting Service and the National Public Radio were distributing nearly 2,000 hours of original programs a year.37/

Along with this growth, however, have come charges that public broadcasting is not that "public." The lack of minority ownership, the few minorities and women in positions of authority, and the feeling that Government, and particularly business, were influential in making program choices, led to President Carter introducing legislation designed to change the public broadcasting system.

The bill calls for altering the responsibility of the Corporation of Public Broadcasting by making it more like an endowment or foundation and moving it away from its current responsibility for choosing individual programs or series. The President believes that this will decentralize creative decisions and place them further away from potential political control.38/

In addition, the President calls on public broadcasters to make available for minorities and women Government funds appropriated for national programing as well as funds from the pooled resources of the stations. The President also proposes that the Public Broadcasting Act should be amended to allow non-Governmental licensees to exercise advocate positions on public issues, thereby eliminating the current ban on editorializing.

The President argues that increased independence from Government does not free stations from stewardship. He believes that such accountability is best exercised directly by local citizens; he therefore recommends that all public stations open their board meetings and financial records to the public. (This, it should be noted, is standard practice at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Public Broadcasting System, National Public Radio, and many public stations.) Finally, the bill makes clear that employment discrimination laws should be vigorously enforced

and that financial assistance should be made available to assist minorities in acquiring control of public stations.39/

Two bills introduced by Rep. Van Deerlin this year also deal with public broadcasting. The Public Telecommunications Financing Act of 1978 supports the idea of open board meetings and the enforcement of equal employment opportunities. And the proposed rewrite of the Communications Act of 1934 contains provisions for a new Corporation for Public Broadcasting board, revenues from a tax on commercial broadcasters, and funds for minority acquisition of stations. (This bill will be discussed in detail later in this essay.)40/

Public interest groups, such as the Citizens Communications Center, have generally supported suggestions to open up public broadcasting, although differing on specific methods to achieve these goals. Particularly, the Center believes that compliance with equal employment opportunities' laws should be the base standard for all recipients of public funds.41/

Opening board meetings and financial records for public broadcasters has expanded the limits of participation. Participation already occurs in a number of ways. Under FCC rules, broadcasters must ascertain the program needs in their communities and make available their FCC license filings. There is, of course, legislative review of all public funds spent on public broadcasting. And there is the direct setting of policy by 2,667 members of the boards of the local stations. Many of the stations have one or more programs where members of the public can participate directly in the programming, and the majority have some form of affirmative action program to provide employment for minorities and women.42/

As public television spokesmen point out, the crucial question is how to balance the need for increased public participation with the need to permit individual creativity to flourish in program production and scheduling. Too much public participation or an improper application of participation may drive away creative people.43/

The problem of extensive public participation has been dealt with by community radio stations for the last 10 years. Numbering about 50, these stations (about one-third are members of National Public Radio, two-thirds are not) have sought to involve citizens in programing, policymaking, and fund raising. Outreach programs have been designed to teach broadcasting skills to all those interested; particular attention has been paid to minorities and women. Rather than being a drawback, participation has helped these stations in developing creative programing and serving the special needs of their community.44/

TELEVISION: VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING

The past decade has witnessed the emergence of citizens' groups concerned with the amount of violence on television and with the quality of programs and commercials aimed at children. It has also seen the beginning of an effort to develop a curriculum of viewing skills for television and to use television as a teaching resource.

Although violence on television had been widely discussed during the 1950's and 1960's — particularly after the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King — network officials contended that no causal link had been demonstrated in social science research between the viewing of violence and subsequent violent actions. The first major scientific findings to refute the networks' contention occurred when the Surgeon General issued a report in 1972 that presented evidence linking television violence and agressive behavior. This report, additional scientific studies, and the continued escalation in the number of violent programs on television finally led the Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) to launch a national campaign against violence on television.45/

In 1976, a National PTA Television Commission was charged with gathering information on the implications of television violence. The commission held eight regional public hearings in major population centers throughout the country. The major findings of the hearings were: (1) that children who viewed violent acts regularly on television became desensitized to violence; (2) that youths sometimes

performed acts of violence in direct imitation of those seen on television; (3) that violence was often portrayed as the only solution — or the best solution to a problem; (4) that the amount of violence on television sometimes leads to a distorted perception of the real world; and (5) that few young viewers had critical viewing skills.46/

The PTA then formulated an action plan based on these findings. PTA members applied pressure to prime-time advertisers, appropriate network officials, and FCC commissioners, as well as local station managers. Training efforts were launched to help PTA members monitor television, and PTA members were informed of their right to petition the FCC to deny a broadcast license to their local station.47/

The PTA's campaign proved effective. Violence on television has been substantially reduced, due in part to the PTA's pressure and changing public taste.48/

Another citizen group that has been actively involved in challenging television programing has been Action for Children's Television (ACT). Launched by women who were concerned about the quality of the programs their children were watching, ACT has grown into a national organization during the last 10 years. It has helped to reduce the number of commercials presented during an hour of Saturday morning children's programing (from 16 minutes an hour to 9½ minutes); it has pushed the networks to create a number of innovative programs; and it has had some effect on the amount of violence in children's cartoons.49/

ACT's lobbying against commercials directed at children has led the Federal Trade Commission to begin the formal process of a hearing on children's advertising. The FTC will investigate the propriety and legality of television advertising — especially for highly sugared foods — directed at children. The Commission's staff has proposed several trade regulation rules including: (1) a prohibition of all television commercials when the viewing audience is composed of a significant proportion of children under age 8; (2) a

prohibition on television advertising for those highly sugared foods most likely to promote dental decay when a significant proportion of children under age 12 are in the audience; and (3) corrective advertising to balance commercials for other sugared foods. Most advertisers are, of course, opposed to such actions, both on First Amendment and economic grounds.50/

Citizen groups and several major institutions are also moving to develop curriculums that would teach critical viewing skills and use television as a teaching instrument. Such a program already exists in Chicago, at the St. Mary Center for Learning. The Office of Education has sent out a Request for Proposal (RFP) on critical viewing skills, and the National Institute of Education is conducting a study on the potential for learning through television. Both the National Education Association and the PTA are beginning to develop television curriculums, with assistance from ABC and CBS.51/

PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING

One vehicle for the dissemination of information about issues is advertising. Although most advertising consists of commercial messages, public service advertising, advocacy advertising, and free speech messages are specifically designed to deal with areas of public concern.

Public Service Announcements (PSA) are designed for noncommercial organizations and aired free of charge by broadcasters. The most prominent sponsor of such commercials is the Advertising Council, which is responsible for about 90 percent of the PSA's aired on national television. In addition, local advertising clubs or individual agencies design a small number of PSA's for community groups.52/

Almost all PSA's are on noncontroversial topics, such as raising money for the Red Cross or the United Negro Fund. Although advertisers would contend that these messages are without political overtones, they provide a

viewpoint of the world that is slanted toward maintaining current social arrangements. As Professor David Paletz writes

> Through the values they espouse, the blame they fail to attribute, the blame they do attribute, the solutions to prob lems they propose; and by excluding dissident groups, by refusing to consider certain subjects and by depoliticizing issues, PSA's contribute to consensus by not "baring structural flaws."53/

Paletz's criticism can be seen most clearly in the Advertising Council's current campaign on the American economic system. PSA's on this topic have resulted in the distribution of more than 11½ million copies of the booklet "The American Economic System and Your Part in It," many going to schools. The booklets and additional pamphlets on inflation, productivity, and unemployment, contain certain basic economic information, but little is said about such structural economic problems as oligopoly, nor is a detailed description given of the labor movement.54/Another booklet, "A Working Economy for Americans," sponsored by such groups as the Consumer Federation of America, the National Educational Association, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, presents a very different view of the economy; but it has not been as widely dispersed because these groups do not have the same access to the channels of distribution as the Advertising Council.55/

Advocacy Advertising

Many members of the business community have been upset by the media's coverage of the free enterprise system. In particular, the Mobil Oil Co., has been engaged for the

past several years in "advocacy advertising" in the area of energy policy. Mobil regularly runs a paid column on the op ed page of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other leading newspapers. It also runs specific advertisements to correct what it believes to be false impressions left by television and newspaper accounts of the problems in the energy field.56/

Critics of advocacy advertising argue that it allows corporations an unfair advantage. They can pay for space; other groups in the society, with counter viewpoints, cannot. Professor S. Prakash Sethi has proposed the establishment of a National Council for Public Information to deal with this problem. This council, which would be supported by corporations and business groups, would ensure adequate media access for different groups and viewpoints that offer alternatives to those advocated by the business establishment. The council would be composed of eminent persons, who would review proposals for advertising time. The media would provide a portion of the time they currently give to public service advertising to these commercials.57/

Free Speech Messages

These messages are 30- to 60-second television spots which allow any person or group to speak on matters of public interest. Based on the concept that access is fairness, citizen groups have been able to institute these spots in a number of television stations in major markets, including the San Francisco Bay area, Pittsburgh, the Twin Cities area, Los Angeles, Denver, New Orleans, and the District of Columbia.58/

Proponents of this method of access have had trouble getting stations to move beyond the limited amount of time they have allocated for these messages. Even supporters of the idea contend that people need help and direction in presenting their messages. Unfortunately, commercial stations are usually unwilling to do this, and only two public interest advertising firms are available in this country to help citizens.59/

To some commentators this is only to be expected. They argue that attempts to increase access, diversity, and participation cannot be fully successful within the current system. Real change will come about only after the system is deregulated and the potential of new technologies is fully realized. The final section of this essay deals with these propositions.

THE COMMUNICATIONS ACT OF 1978

The Communications Act of 1978, introduced by Rep. Lionel Van Deerlin (D-Calif.) and Rep. Louis Frey (R-Fla.), chairmen of the House Communications Subcommittee, revolves around a series of controversial trade-offs aimed at reducing regulation of broadcasting. The license fee for all users of the spectrum is the cornerstone of the legislation.

Money derived from the fee collection would be divided four ways. It would pay all the bills of the Communications Regulatory Commission, the new name of the FCC. It would become the sole source of Government support for a new public broadcasting programing entity, the Public Telecommunications Programing Endowment. And it would provide funds for minority ownership and rural telecommunication development.60/

Radio, and television to a lesser extent, would be deregulated. Radio stations would be licensed for indefinite terms, subject to revocation only for technical violations; they would be released from ascertainment, equal time, and fairness doctrine requirements. The rationale for these changes is that since the number of radio stations now equals the number of newspapers, the argument that radio must be regulated because it is a scarce public resource is no longer valid.61/

The committee believes, however, that a scarcity factor still exists in television. Many more people want to use the resource than can be accommodated. For that reason, the bill retains a limit on the length of television

licenses, but extends it from the present 3 years to 5. After 10 years, the bill provides that television licenses would also shift to indefinite terms. Television would also be released from ascertainment, but unlike radio, would be required to carry news, public affairs, and locally produced programing throughout the broadcast day.

TV would be subject to an "equity principle" — a fairness doctrine without the required affirmative effort to cover controversial issues of public importance. But when it did cover controversial topics, a television station would have to do so in an equitable manner. The equal time provision is continued, and the proposed bill contemplates doing away entirely with Federal regulation of cable television.62/

The object of this bill is to reduce the amount of red tape involved in broadcasting in the hope that stations will spend more on local programing. Owners' property rights will be protected, and the fee will provide the funds for creating greater diversity. The explosion in technology will provide greater consumer choice; it is believed that Government regulation will only hinder the spirit of innovation.63/

Industry spokesmen have been generally favorable to the proposals, except for the fee arrangement. Citizen groups, however, have been upset. They argue that the mechanisms established under the FCC to give citizens a voice in broadcasting were just becoming effective. They feel that espousing a free enterprise system of communication will result in a perpetuation of the inequities that currently exist. Finally, they are not certain that the technological changes will lead to greater diversity and access.64/

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

In the forefront of the new technologies is cable television. Cable has the capacity to provide up to 30 channels. Its sponsors claim that the availability of so many channels will solve the access and diversity problems. They say they are quite willing to provide one or two public access channels if local communities allow them the right to franchise.

Once available only in rural areas, cable has grown until now one of every five television homes receives non-network programs through a cable subscription service. And about 1.6 million viewers are paying extra monthly fees for special pay cable channels.65/

Several other technical innovations have become available. This past year has seen the introduction of videodisks — long-playing records that produce television images as well as sound. Videocassette recorders have also been introduced. These devices tape programs presented while the owner is away, and they also play videocassettes. Optical fibers will soon permit using a laser beam to transmit an almost limitless number of channels.66/

Two developments hold the most promise for communications and citizen education. One is two-way, interactive cable television and the other is satellite transmission.

Experiments are currently underway in the use of interactive cable in two areas —Columbus, Ohio, and Reading, Pa. The "Qube" system in Columbus is sponsored by the Warner Cable Co. This system permits viewers to talk back to their sets through an electronic device attached to the sets. After an announcer's voice or a message displayed on the screen calls for an audience decision on some queston, viewers can punch the appropriate response button and send an electronic signal to a bank of computers at Qube's main headquarters. There the computers tabulate the votes and flash the results on the home screen.

This interactive device has been used in a variety of ways from voting on talent contests, to sophisticated word and puzzle games, to obtaining public response to political candidates. It has also been used to test public reaction to a development plan proposed by the government of Upper Arlington, a Columbus suburb. Because the system can aim programs at any segment of its audience, the planning board was able to poll all of Upper Arlington's viewers on the overall plan and then canvas those affected by particular parts of the plan.67/

The Reading experiment, sponsored by the New York University Alternative Media Center, is designed to evaluate the use of two-way cable television. This experiment has tried to determine the costs and benefits of using interactive telecommunications to deliver public services and to evaluate the impact of this communication technology on senior citizens and public agencies.

The cable system here consists of three interconnected neighborhood communication centers, as well local government offices, high schools, and the homes of local cable subscribers. The programs, which are transmitted 2 hours a day, 5 days a week, are conceived and produced by senior citizens and representatives of local organizations. Senior citizens participate in virtually all aspects of the interactive system. They are responsible for planning and developing programs, and they are involved in the operation of the neighborhood communication centers.68/

Weekly programs are conducted in which senior citizens communicate directly with elected municipal and county officials. Senior citizens utilize these programs to articulate their preferences about public goods and services provided by local governmental units. Requests for information, specific demands, and evaluations are made on local issues.

The interactive system personalizes the contact between citizen and public official and enhances the traditional functions of local government officials. Elected officials are able to obtain accurate and regular information on citizen concerns without leaving their offices, and also use the system to explain the constraints and dilemmas they face in resolving urban problems.

Public service agencies regard the system as an innovative means of providing outreach services which are otherwise conducted through staff visits. The municipal and county governments view the cable as a mechanism for obtaining citizen feedback on public policies and programs, while other service agencies utilize the two-way programing to disseminate information to clientele who are traditionally hard to reach.69/

Although two-way interactive television seems to have many benefits for citizen participation, some worry that instant plebiscites could pose problems for our republican form of government, which rests on the idea of informed opinion. They also fear the power that could be held by those who control such programs.70/

Cable itself poses problems. Becauseof the number of channels it can deliver, citizens may be flooded with information. This might increase the difficulty of making decisions about public affairs.71/

In addition, cable might be available only to the most affluent segments of the society and not to the poor. However, evidence exists that when cable reaches 30 percent of the population it will "take off." Its price will lower dramatically as more and more of the population subscribe. In addition, the advertising community at that point will become interested in using cable to reach discrete markets. With the introduction of commercials, cable's price will fall even more.72/

Another area that may benefit citizen education is the use of communication satellites. Satellite video conferencing permits congressmen in Washington to see, hear, and talk with groups of citizens at distant locations around the country. On June 8, 1977, the Subcommittee on Science, Technology, and Space of the United States Senate conducted a legislative hearing by means of the Communications Technology Satellite (CTS), the public service communications research satellite operated jointly by the United States and Canada. This was but one of several such experiments. Participants found that congressmen reach people effectively, that it increases citizen participation and feedback, saves the time and energy of congressmen and constituents, and stimulates citizen interest in and understanding of the legislative process.73/

Proponents of this method of citizen participation argue that satellite videoconferencing can become widely available if an operational satellite system is developed for commercial and/or public service use.74/

The requirements of an operational system suitable for use by the Congress and other public service users (e.g., educational, health, and community groups; Federal, State, and local government agencies) include: low-cost earth terminals and satellite time, low-cost videoconferencing studios, and low-cost video origination and interconnect capability. Low-cost videoconferencing studios are possible now, and much of the necessary video origination and interconnect capability already exists or is under construction as part of the communications support for regular House/Senate operations.75/

The major uncertainty is the availability of low-cost satellite earth terminals. These terminals can be located on or near public buildings throughout the country (thus eliminating the need for expensive landline interconnection and minimizing frequency interference problems), and mobile terminals can be located in small towns and rural areas which do not need permanent facilities.75/

Proponents of videoconferencing and citizens groups working to develop public interest access on satellites, are united around one concern. They are urging that the United States in its preparation for the 1979 World Administrative Radio Conference, which will allocate international frequency use, give full consideration to public service needs. The United States, they argue, should take no action or position which would foreclose public service videoconferencing options or other educational and public interest use.77/

THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM AND THE FUTURE

The past decade has seen the rise of citizen groups desiring to break open a closed system of communication. They have largely succeeded in destroying the legal barriers that prevented their participation in the system. The influence of the PTA's campaign against violence, plus the many other reforms public interest groups have brought about, indicates their growing influence within the communication world. Until now there has been a fairly stable agenda of reform: concern for program quality, format, and

stereotyping; equal employment opportunities; access; diversification of ownership; enforcement of broadcasting regulations; and viewer education. But the proposed changes in communications legislation and the introduction of new technologies are changing the rules of the game.78/

The central thrust of the major bills before Congress seems to be to get the Government out of the business of regulation, to throw open commercial communications to market forces, to decentralize decisionmaking, and to promote citizen involvement and access in public broadcasting. The increasing number of channels and systems of delivery of information that are becoming available diminish the rationale for Government involvement in commercial broadcasting; at the same time, they provide the possibility of reaching audiences who have heretofore been excluded.79/

Numerous academics and reformers believe that the problems of the mass media will be exacerbated rather than diminished by the proliferation of channels for delivery and the deregulation of communications. They believe that the responsibility for access and diversity will remain with the broadcasters, and the need for citizen involvement will continue.80/

This different communications environment seems to imply several charges for citizen groups.

1. They will have to ensure that citizen interests are protected in the areas of new technologies, from satellites, to cable, to videodisks.
2. They will need to become involved in training citizens how to use the media — either through obtaining access to production skills or developing their own.
3. They will need to develop, along with schools, critical viewing skills, so that the differences in the ability to deal with information associated with social and economic status can be narrowed.

4. And they will have to continue to pressure and negotiate with media decisionmakers, regardless of the type of system that will eventually emerge from Congress.

It appears then that the system of freedom of expression will depend ultimately on the desire of citizens to have media that provide an open and diverse discussion of public events. In a democracy, the responsibility should rest no place else.

NOTES

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